Politics

Russia Ramps Up Strikes on Ukraine Energy After Offensive Stalls

Firefighters battle flames at a thermal power plant following a series of explosions in Kyiv on Oct. 10. *Photographer: Kostiantyn Liberov/Libkos/Getty Images*

By Bloomberg News
October 10, 2025 at 8:18 PM GMT+3

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Takeaways by Bloomberg AI

- Russia has intensified its air strikes on Ukrainian cities to cripple the country's energy system and demoralize its population.
- Ukraine has focused its strikes on Russian refineries to disrupt Moscow's energy trade and bring the war closer to home.
- Russia's strategy is to destroy Ukraine's energy facilities to accelerate the end of the conflict, which it describes as a form of forced peace.

Russia has intensified its air strikes on Ukrainian cities as part of a deliberate strategy to cripple the country’s energy system and demoralize its population after a summer offensive failed to gain traction.

As winter approaches, Russian missiles and drones triggered a blackout in Kyiv early Friday reminiscent of sprawling power disruptions in the capital in the first full winter of the war, in 2022-2023. Destruction and outages in other regions across the war-battered nation spread as air defenses struggled to down hundreds of projectiles across Ukraine's vast territory.

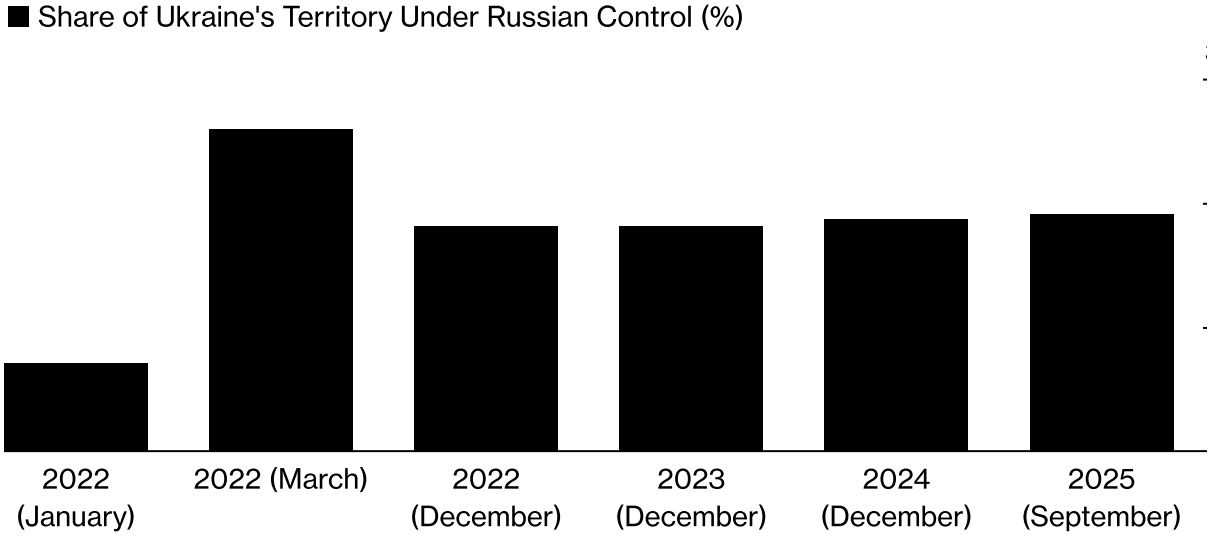
Each sides has taken to pounding the other's energy infrastructure, with Ukraine focusing its strikes on refineries – some of them deep within Russian territory – in an effort to disrupt Moscow's energy trade and bring the war, well into its fourth year, closer to home.

President Vladimir Putin's ground offensive this year failed to bring the Kremlin closer to its war goals, including wresting full control over the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk – and far short of ambitions to demilitarize Ukraine and overthrow its government.

"They can't do anything on the battlefield, so they directly attack energy," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy told reporters in Kyiv Friday. "This is what's happening today."

Breakthroughs on the battlefield have become more difficult to achieve because a proliferation of drones have widened the frontline into a broad kill zone, where troops can more easily fall prey to unmanned aerial vehicles and precision artillery strikes.

Russia's Efforts to Seize More Ukrainian Land Falter



Source: Bloomberg Intelligence

Despite pouring new troops and weapons into combat, Russia has only marginally accelerated the pace of its offensive since May. Moscow's forces have made gains amounting to about half of a percent of Ukraine's total territory this year. That's roughly the same as in 2024, according to data on DeepState.

Struggling to achieve progress on the ground, Russia has ratcheted up aerial attacks since August, when US President Donald Trump hosted Putin in Alaska in what turned out to be a failed effort to end the fighting.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian drone attacks on Russia's oil refineries have cut crude processing, prompting Moscow to send crude abroad for refining. Zelenskiy told reporters this week that a gasoline shortage in Russia was as high as 20% of needs, a figure that couldn't be independently verified or confirmed by Moscow.

The Kremlin's strategy isn't new. But Russian war planners have now determined that they have a free hand to ravage Ukraine's gas infrastructure after Kyiv shut down the transit gas pipeline to Europe, according to the people familiar with the matter in Russian gas industry.

Vehicle lights illuminate a highway during a blackout following a power loss in Kyiv on Oct. 10. *Photographer: Andrew Kravchenko/Bloomberg*

Beforehand, there was a tacit understanding not to target gas infrastructure while Russian fuel was being pumped to Europe, the people said on condition of anonymity as deliberations take place behind closed doors. There are currently no market forces forcing Moscow to spare Ukraine's gas infrastructure, they said.

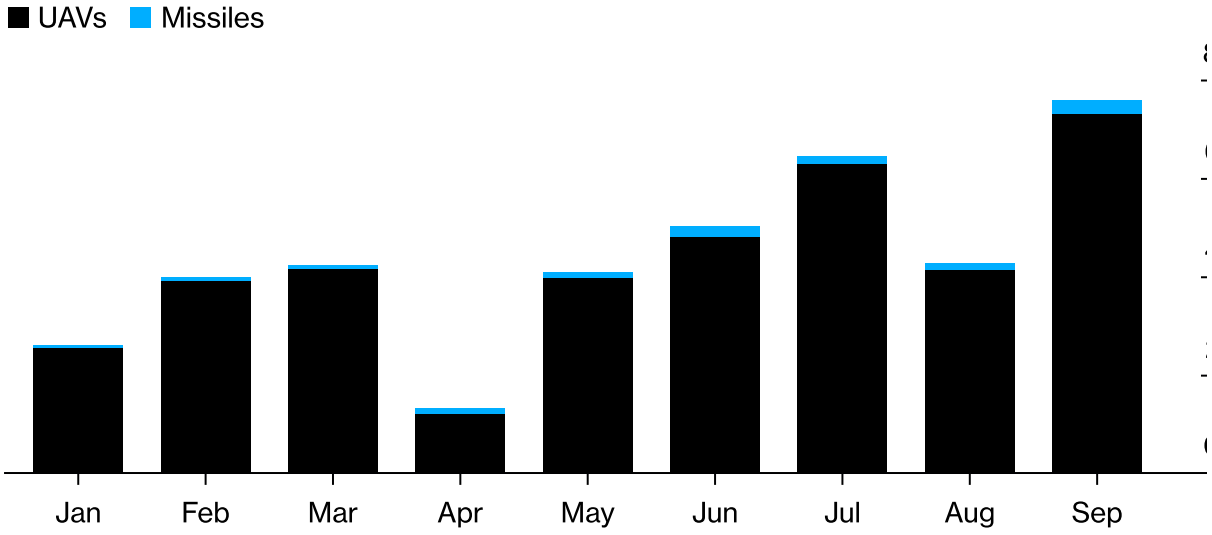
Gazprom PJSC no longer sees Europe as a market and has turned its focus to China and other Asian countries.

Russia calculates that the destruction of Ukraine's energy facilities will accelerate the end of the conflict, the people said, describing it is as a form of forced peace. Europe could also come under pressure, since it will have to ensure gas deliveries to Ukraine in addition to its own supplies.

The strategy has delivered some results. Recent Russian barrages targeting the Kharkiv and Poltava regions in northern Ukraine took out roughly 60% of the country's gas production, according to people with knowledge of the matter. That will likely force the country to spend 1.9 billion euros ($2.2 billion) on fuel imports to survive the winter, they said.

Russia Escalates Aerial Barrages Against Ukraine

Numbers of Russian drone and missile launches are growing



Source: Data from Ukraine's Commissioner on Sanctions Policy

Ukraine's biggest private power producer DTEK said on Friday that its thermal power stations were hit for the third time in less than a week, bringing the number of attacks on its facilities to more than 200 since the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022.

The concern in Kyiv and among allies is that the attacks will not ease without the US applying significant pressure on Russia, according to people familiar with the thinking in European capitals.

Trump has repeatedly threatened to hit Russia with significant sanctions, criticizing the bombing campaign – and said he's disappointed with Putin. But so far there have been few ramifications.

The US has floated the possibility of providing Ukraine with long-range Tomahawk missiles, one of the most advanced weapons in its arsenal. Kyiv has long asked for more robust air defenses and longer-range capabilities to hit military targets within Russia.

Putin on Friday dismissed the threat as "bluffing." Russia will strengthen its air defenses – and will also soon put on display new weaponry, he told a leaders of several former Soviet republics in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

The European Union's latest sanctions package meanwhile is being stalled by Austria and Slovakia. Discussions on using frozen Russian assets to fund Ukraine's military needs are months away from a resolution.

Ukrainian firefighters work in a residential building that was damaged during a massive Russian drone and missile strikes to the Ukrainian capital Kyiv on Oct. 10. *Photographer: Genya Savilov/AFP/Getty Images*

The next weeks, as winter approaches, will be decisive, the people said.

Group of Seven nations have been working on a set of measures, including restrictions on Russian oil companies and sanctions on companies in third countries that enable Moscow's energy trade.

Ministers will continue discussions in Washington next week on the sidelines of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank meetings. The delivery of more air defense systems will be the main topic of the meetings that a delegation of Ukraine's top government officials will hold in the US next week, Zelenskiy said on Friday.

EU leaders are due to meet in Brussels for a summit later this month where both sanctions and Russia's assets will be high on the agenda.

Ukraine's allies have repeatedly said that it's crucial to starve Russia of the oil revenues that Moscow needs to finance its war, though putting that aim into practice has proved a challenge – and for now that goal is mostly pursued by Kyiv.

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